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EDWARD CONLEY

SIHANOUK - RETIREMENT ON SCHEDULE

ANNCR: VOA NEWS ANALYST EDWARD CONLEY REPORTS ON PRINCE NORODOM SIHANOUK'S ANNOUNCEMENT THAT HE HAS RETIRED AS CAMBODIA'S HEAD OF STATE.

VOICE: THE WEEKEND ANNOUNCEMENT FROM PHNOM PENH, WHILE DRAMATIC, WAS NOT UNEXPECTED. PRINCE SIHANOUK REQUESTED THAT HE BE ALLOWED TO RETIRE AS CAMBODIA'S HEAD OF STATE. KHIEU SAMPHAN, A TOP SPOKESMAN FOR THE COUNTRY'S YEAR-OLD COMMUNIST REGIME, ACCEPTED THE REQUEST. IN ONE WAY, THE ACTION CLEARED UP A STICKY PROBLEM WHICH HAD BEEN FACING CAMBODIA, WHOSE NEW CONSTITUTION MAKES NO PROVISION FOR A HEAD OF STATE. IT ALSO PROVED AN EASY TRANSITION FROM AN AWKWARD SITUATION WHICH FOUND THE FIFTY-THREE-YEAR-OLD PRINCE ALLIED WITH KHMER ROUGE LEADERS WHOM HE HAD BANISHED FROM CAMBODIA FOR THEIR LEFTIST LEANINGS PRIOR TO HIS OWN OVERTHROW IN 1970.

THROUGHOUT HIS FIVE-YEAR EXILE IN CHINA, PRINCE SIHANOUK WAS A VOCAL SUPPORTER OF THE EVENTUALLY SUCCESSFUL COMMUNIST WAR AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT OF PRESIDENT LON NOL. BUT, ONCE KHMER ROUGE TROOPS TOOK OVER CAMBODIA LAST APRIL, THE PRINCE HIMSELF EMPHASIZED FROM HIS PEKING RESIDENCE THAT HE WOULD HAVE LITTLE TO DO IN ANY NEW CAMBODIAN GOVERNMENT. HIS GENERAL IMPRESSION: "THEY DON'T NEED ME."

EVEN BEFORE THE COMMUNIST TAKEOVER, IT HAD BECOME APPARENT THAT SIHANOUK HAD LOST ANY POWER HE MIGHT HAVE HELD IN CAMBODIA. AS THE WAR DREW NEAR A CLOSE, THE PRINCE TOOK AN EMBARRASSING SECOND SEAT TO KHIEU SAMPHAN WHEN THE COMMUNIST BATTLEFIELD LEADER SIGNED AN ECONOMIC AID AGREEMENT WITH PREMIER CHOU EN-LAI

IN PEKING. WHEN SAMPHAN, THEN ACTING AS CAMBODIAN DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, RETURNED TO CHINA FOLLOWING THE WAR'S END, HE AND HIS KHMER ROUGE ASSOCIATES RECEIVED THE ACCOLADES WHILE SIHANOUK WATCHED. PRINCE SIHANOUK'S EVENTUAL RETURN TO PHNOM PENH WITH SAMPHAN AND OTHERS WAS SEEN BY SOME OBSERVERS IN TWO LIGHTS. FIRST, TO ELICIT THE SUPPORT OF CAMBODIANS WHO EVEN FIVE YEARS AFTER HIS OUSTER IN A COUP D'ETAT STILL WARMLY REGARDED THE FLAMBOUYANT, SMILING EX-MONARCH. SECOND, TO AVOID EMBARRASSMENT TO CHINESE PREMIER CHOU EN-LAI -- COMMUNIST CAMBODIA'S BENEFACTOR, AND PRINCE SIHANOUK'S HOST IN EXILE.

IN ANNOUNCING HIS PLANS TO RESIGN, THE CAMBODIAN PRINCE -- WHO USED WIT AND BARB TO PLEASE ALLIES AND PROD ENEMIES -- SAID THAT AFTER THIRTY-FIVE YEARS OF LEADERSHIP, ALL HIS WISHES FOR CAMBODIA "HAVE BEEN REALIZED WITHOUT EXCEPTION." THIS, DESPITE REPORTS THAT HE WEPT IN PRIVATE UPON SEEING THE SITUATION IN HIS LAND WHEN HE RETURNED TO PHNOM PENH LATE LAST YEAR.

PRINCE SIHANOUK HINTED HE WILL NOW BE LEAVING CAMBODIA, THE COUNTRY HE LOVED, WHICH -- AFTER BEING DRAWN INTO THE BIGPOWER STRUGGLE OVER VIETNAM -- FOUND ITSELF DECIMATED. THE ANT WAS UNABLE TO AVOID THE BATTLE OF THE ELEPHANTS. WHERE HE WILL GO IS NOT KNOWN. WHAT HE WILL LEAVE BEHIND IS A SHIMMERING ROYAL PALACE, THE BEAUTIFUL ANKHOR WAT TEMPLES WHERE HE HAD HOPED TO BURY THE ASHES OF HIS MOTHER, THE REMEMBRANCES OF THIRTY-FIVE YEARS OF REVERENCE FROM THE CAMBODIAN PEOPLE.

WHAT HE TAKES OUT OF THE COUNTRY IS ANY POSSIBLE DANGER TO THE AUTHORITY OF CAMBODIA'S STRICT REGIME. A REGIME THAT

INITIALLY SHOWED ITS POWER BY SENDING MILLIONS OF CAMBODIANS INTO THE CLASSLESS SOCIETY OF THE COUNTRYSIDE, AND NOW SHOWS ITS POWER BY SEVERING THE COUNTRY'S LINKS WITH ITS PAST AT THE TOP.

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